

Cleveland Classical Guitar Society: William Kanengiser's "Global Guitar"

by Jarrett Hoffman



"I've always thought of the guitar as a universal instrument," William Kanengiser said during a recent interview. "Every musical culture has some relative of the guitar, so it's well-suited for evoking those different cultures."

On Saturday, May 14 at 7:30 pm at Plymouth Church, Kanengiser will conclude the Cleveland Classical Guitar Society's 2021-2022

International Series with a program titled "Global Guitar." Tickets are available [here](#).

One important element in the program is Kanengiser's ongoing Diaspora Project, in which he commissions new works dedicated to groups of people who have left their ancestral homelands behind. That project will be represented by three pieces on Saturday, including a premiere by Andrea Clearfield.

"She's based in Philadelphia and has an incredible career," Kanengiser said, noting that he was intrigued by her field research on traditional Tibetan music, "cataloging these melodies that might disappear forever."

Among the songs that Clearfield cataloged was a tribute to the *dranyen*, a three-stringed, plucked instrument traditional to the region around the Himalayas. The melody to that song became a starting point for the piece that will be premiered on Saturday, titled *Reflections on the Life of the Dranyen*.



“It’s very heartfelt, especially the ending.” Kanengiser said. “It closes with this tapping, like a faint heartbeat, that’s meant to invoke this culture that’s so much in peril right now.”



Another work born out of the Diaspora Project is Golfam Khayam’s *Lost Land*. “She’s an incredibly talented guitarist-composer from Tehran,” Kanengiser said, noting that he was introduced to her through another guitarist-composer, his friend — and her former teacher — Dušan Bogdanović.

Of all the pieces that have come out of the Project, this one best evokes “the feeling of being a refugee or an emigree,” Kanengiser said. “She grew up in Iran, studied for some time in Cincinnati and in Switzerland, then decided to go back to Iran. But she said that when she went back to her country after all that time, she almost didn’t recognize it.” Notably, Khayam gave her piece the tempo marking of *Adagio disorientato*.

Kanengiser also said that the piece draws on Khayam’s expertise with Persian ornamentation and improvisation. “It uses a lot of filigree over the melody to imitate that melismatic style, and it’s very much inspired by kanun playing,” he said, referencing that string instrument popular in the Middle East and beyond.

Back to Dušan Bogdanović — we paused our discussion about Diaspora Project pieces to talk about that composer’s *Three African Sketches*. “It’s one of my favorite pieces of his,” Kanengiser said. “I’ve played it for years and years, and it fits the theme extremely well.”

In that piece, Bogdanović leans into one of his favorite compositional techniques. “He’s just crazy about polymeter,” Kanengiser said, noting the composer’s research into the rhythms of traditional African drumming. “So this piece has one thing going on in one voice, and another thing in another voice — happily coexisting but almost unrelated to each other. It’s really delightful.”



What will stick out to audiences right away is the sound of the prepared guitar, used for the outer movements in order to imitate the sound of the West African, 22-stringed kora.

“It’s this simple little trick,” Kanengiser said. “You take a staple — a normal household staple — and bend the corners of it a little bit so it clips two strings together. Then when you pluck one string, it kind of clangs the other one, and you get this wonderful sound.”



Rounding out the Diaspora Project pieces on this program is *The Bootlegger’s Tale*, “this fantastic piece by my friend Bryan Johanson, who’s one of the most prolific creative people I know,” Kanengiser said. “And he’s so fast. I asked him to write this piece, and it seemed like he’d already sent it by the time I hung up the phone.”

The bootlegger in question? Johanson’s maternal grandfather, who used to tell him stories about his escapades hiding booze and running from the law — as referenced in the fourth movement, “Head for the Hills.”

“This piece really tells a story,” Kanengiser said. “But he also very cleverly mixes Irish fiddle tunes with Appalachian music — and there’s not that much difference between them actually.”

Along with the piece, Johanson also included some kind words about Kanengiser. “He wrote a really touching thing where he calls me a narrative guitarist. His idea is that my strong suit is really telling a story with my playing.”

A good match, then, for a bootlegger’s tale.

Saturday’s program also includes works by Joaquín Turina, John Duarte, Leo Brouwer, and Brian Head — details [here](#).

On Friday, May 13 at 7:00 pm, Kanengiser will present a master class in the Dolen Science Center Reading Room at John Carroll University. The class is open to the public.

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